1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

Chapter Ten

INDIGENOUS LEARNING AND TEACHING

It has been pointed out by some anthropologists that in homogeneous primitive societies, the attention is focused more on the desirability of learning over against the desirability of teaching.[1] As the cultural alternatives are so limited in such communities, the individual finds himself learning the accepted skills, habits and attitudes which everyone else agrees that he would wish to learn. The desirability of learning the socially acceptable modes of living is contrasted, on the whole, with modern societies where individuals are taught various things on which there is no consensus of agreement that everyone has a desire to know. This distinction between folk and modern societies reflected in the different methods of learning and teaching is, of course, not an absolute distinction. For instance, in folk communities teaching does take place, e.g. in certain ceremonies, in the constant corrections and admonitions to children, and so on; and learning does take place in modern societies in the family and group situations.

In folk communities in general, the educative process, whether through learning or teaching, is coterminous with life, and none of its situations is deliberately singled out or isolated for drill or special training.[2] In Silwa the popular saying tends to confirm that the desire to learn is preferable to the need of being taught: 'If the boy does not learn, time will teach him the hard way.' This is also in line with the traditions of Moslem society, where people have been expected to seek knowledge as 'knowledge does not seek people'. Whether in search of special skills or religious enlightenment, the master did not go seeking pupils, but rather the converse. In the Arabic language the word for pupil or student (talib) literally means 'the searcher', he who requests and requires knowledge.

It should also be pointed out here that folk life in Silwa has been relatively independent of the influence of the written word, and it has been affected by it only through a small number of people who were considered

[1] Margaret Mead, 'Our Educational Emphases in Primitive Perspective', in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XLVIII, 1943, p. 634.
[2] M. Fortes, *Social and Psychological Aspects of Education in Taleland*, p. 27.

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

to be specialists in transmitting to others the religious knowledge of the Holy Book and the pious ancestors. The oral means of communicating and committing to memory the accumulated experiences is the best guide for perpetuating the group's tradition. It is not surprising, then, that old people are considered as knowing more than the young, and that, on these grounds, they are worthy of respect and obedience. The young have to wait many years before they can wield the same prestige and authority, for the instruments of wisdom may only be acquired through the passage of time. It is not unusual to hear people who wish to assert their position or to impress others with their views saying: 'I am a man who has witnessed both the pre-Islamic (jahiliya) and Islamic eras.'[1]

Good memory is certainly a great asset and indeed highly valued in Silwa, and the person with a good memory is usually described as the one with 'the full head'. The ability to remember names, places, events, and genealogies enhances the person's popularity and makes his participation and consultation desirable in social activities. The emphasis on memory training is impressed on the child as early as its efforts to learn to talk. Mothers utter a few words for the child to repeat, and then ask it to go round to all those who may be present, and say these words to each in turn, and this is recognized as the best method for the teaching of language. One of the favourite amusements of adults with children is to test the latter in reciting the names of their families in genealogical order. Very frequently, however, the adults may purposely interject incorrect names to mislead the children. Some children between the age of three and four, on being asked by the writer to recite their family names, would tell him as many as four or five of their names (the first name, followed by the father's name, the grandfather's, the great-grandfather's and so on).[2] In a symbolical way, the mother encourages the child to eat pigeon's head, as it is believed that this will foster the child's alertness of memory in later years of life.

It would be very difficult to determine here to what extent the importance laid on memory and memorization has been the product of the Islamic view of learning. It should be mentioned, however, in this connection that knowledge, for the Moslem scholars, was not so much a reaching out to the unknown (research), as it was a mechanical process of amassing the 'known'; the known being eternal and given, is unchangeable. Thus the acquisition of information and the deduction from accepted premises were the most important methods of knowledge.[3] A learned man

[1] This is, of course, an artificial claim such as the English expression, 'I don't know him from Adam'. The historical sense amongst the villagers, especially the older generation, is mainly thought of in the partition between the two eras, the pre-Islamic and the Islamic.

[2] It must be pointed out that in Silwa, or for that matter in Egypt as a whole, there is no system of first names and surnames. In Silwa, every person is always called by his first name. Unfamiliarity or respect requires only the addition of the title 'sheikh' in front of the first name.

[3] H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, pp. 64–6.

1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

INDIGENOUS LEARNING AND TEACHING

is to this day judged by the amount of the Koran and the number of prophetic traditions which he can quote, and the number of proverbs and maxims he can bring into the argument. It is not surprising then that out of some twenty learned religious men in the village, five of them are well known for their perfect memorization of the Koran, two for the memorization of many poetic verses of the Sheikhs of the Nakhshabandia sect, thus becoming the leaders of the order in the village, while two others are acknowledged as the most able reciters of verses and charms to ward off the 'evil eye'. From the linguistic point of view, for the speaker to claim that he knows a great deal about a particular thing, event, or person, is for him to assert that he 'memorizes it, or him, to the best of his memory'.[1]

The writer is inclined to assume that the Islamic culture, or at least as it is practised in the Silwa community, emphasizes and fosters rote learning, memory, and enumerative procedures. There is abundant evidence of this in the repetitive elements in greetings, in conversation, in the verses and choruses in folk singing, in the ritual of the mystical orders (zikr), in the need to know the ninety-nine attributes of God, and the thirty-three names of the Prophet, and in the traditional way of memorizing the Koran in the Kuttab. In this connection, MacDonald says, 'Moslem practice was to repeat aloud until the thing was learnt—that is, by heart. They had observed, too, that no special thought was called for, only continued repetition.'[2]

In stating that the village culture mainly stimulates memory as the most important cognitive process one does not necessarily imply that people in the village have good memories. This emphasis on memory could be related to what Bateson calls the eidos of a culture, meaning by it that a culture might have a bias for the standardization of the cognitive aspects of the personality of its participants expressed in their cultural behaviour.[3] One is tempted here to ask a similar question to that posed by Bateson himself as to what extent this bias for amassing knowledge is limited only to a small number of specialists. In attempting an answer, it must be remembered that the stimulation of a small number of specialists can react on the culture as a whole; they have set themselves up as the leaders of the village life both in religious and social matters. From this it is fairly justified to conclude, as Bateson did, that 'the individuals most affected by the stimulation of memory actually contribute very much more than their fellows to the elaboration and maintenance of the culture'.[4]

[1] The equivalent phrase to this in the colloquial language of the village is 'hafdanuh hifd', in classical Arabic 'ahfathuh hiftha'.

[2] MacDonald, *Aspects of Islam*, New York, 1911. The resort to rote learning has been the bane of education in modern schools. Criticisms of students' 'parrot-like' work are abundant in many of the official Government Reports. See E. Claparède, *Rapport Général Présenté au Ministère de l'Instruction Publique*, Cairo, 1929; F. O. Mann, *A Report on Certain Aspects of Egyptian Education*, Cairo, 1929; Ministry of Education, *Report on Secondary Education*, Cairo, 1935.

[3] Gregory Bateson, *Naven*, p. 220.

[4] Ibid., pp. 226–7.

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

children and adults have their feet firmly established on the ground, and fancies of imagination are neither encouraged nor desirable.

My informant, Ali, told me a point which is relevant to this question of imagination. He said that one should not think in terms of 'if' or 'as if', as according to the prophetic tradition, ' "if" opens the path for the Devil's advance'. It is also interesting to mention that the classical Arabic word for imagination (khayal) is used in the village to denote 'shadow', and does not refer to a mental process, except, of course, to some literate persons. This does not mean that some children are not imaginative, and they are recognized by other children who may sometimes sneer at them by asking them to relate some of their fantasies (literally pinches). Children would tell you that such flights of fancy run through certain families. Adults, however, do not expect children to use, much less exercise or enrich, their imagination as this would hamper their social and economic maturity.

In discussing the formal educational institutions in the village at the present time, the Kuttab comes first in importance, as it is the indigenous school for memorizing the Koran. The word 'Kuttab' is an old Arabic word, connected in its etymological derivation with the word 'kitab' (book), being the place where the Holy Book is learnt. The educational ideals and methods of this institution are mainly influenced by the Islamic tradition of learning, an example of which is the advice given by the Caliph Harun al Rashid to al-Ahmar, the tutor of his son, al-Amin, in which he said: 'O, Ahmar, I have given you the child of my blood, the fruit of my loins, and given you power over him, and made him obedient to you; therefore prove worthy of this position. Teach him the Koran, History, Poetry, Traditions, and appreciation of eloquence. Prevent him from laughing except on proper occasions. Accustom him to respect the Sheikhs of the Hashimite family, and to offer a place to the military commanders if they attend to his council. . . . Do not be too kind to him, or he will take to idleness. Improve him kindly, but if that will not suffice, you can treat him harshly.'[1]

Another example would also serve to illustrate the content and method of Islamic education. This is taken from the instructions given by 'Amr Ibn 'Utbah to the tutor of his sons: 'My sons will be deeply influenced by you: favour what you do, and abhor what you avoid. Teach them the Koran, but without wearying them of it, recite to them what is good in traditions, and chaste in poetry. . . . Teach them the virtues of wise men, and keep them away from women's conversation.'[2] Whether with private

content and of 'perspective' in technique; with persons walking sideways in the ancient Egyptian tradition of drawing.

For similar results about free drawings, see Margaret Mead, *Growing up in New Guinea*, p. 12.

[1] A. Ibn Khaldoun, *al-Mukkadimah*, Cairo, p. 399 (Arabic).

[2] A. Shalaby, 'History of Moslem Education' (Ph.D. Thesis, unpublished, Cambridge University, 1950).

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

INDIGENOUS LEARNING AND TEACHING

This is the normal routine of the Kuttab, one which has now been challenged by the compulsory school which does not allow any boy between seven and twelve years old to attend the Kuttab for a full day, and at present only those who are less than seven or over twelve can afford to remain in the Kuttab for the full day. In spite of this some of the compulsory school boys attend the Kuttab early in the morning where they write their Koranic assignment before going to the school; some of them bring their loaves of bread at lunch-time for the Sheikh, and spend about an hour after the end of the school day in the Kuttab learning the Koran.

The Kuttab is not merely an educational institution for the boys. Adults also visit it to consult the Sheikh about certain religious matters, to have a letter written, or a charm supplied against the evil eye, or just to listen to the Koran being recited, or even for an ordinary chat. They have free access to the Kuttab, sitting outside or in the outer room, or they may enter it to ask the Sheikh's permission to take away their boy temporarily for some pressing errand or task. One occasionally sees adults bringing food or tea to Kuttab children as a 'karama', or to invoke the boys' purity in asking God to fulfil one of his wishes. The Kuttab boys are supposed to combine the innocence of children with the 'baraka' of the Koran, and hence their prayers are usually answered by God. Parents go to the Kuttab to complain to the Sheikh about the misdemeanours of their sons, whereupon the Sheikh would give the boys concerned a lesson on the importance of obedience to parents, or threaten them, or even thrash them in front of their parents. The method of discipline in the Kuttab is that of *jus flagelli*. In cases of serious offences such as offending one's father or swearing at religion, or mentioning the mother in swearing, two strong boys would hold the offender's feet in a turban (usually the offender's turban if he wears one), and lift them in front of the Sheikh, who would administer the striking as he deems fit. The corporal punishment administered to the children by the Kuttab Sheikh is almost universally accepted by the villagers without complaint. During my stay, there was only one occasion on which one of the villagers lodged a complaint against the Sheikh to the police, accusing the former of unduly thrashing his son, and this, according to the Sheikh himself, was the first event of its kind in his lifetime. Since then none of the Sheikhs has accepted that boy in his Kuttab.

The Sheikhs are indeed highly respected in the village, for they not only teach the boys the Koran, but derive their status from the fact that they are the perpetuators of the Holy Book giving enlightenment to the people on religious matters. In Silwa and its neighbouring villages, the leaders of the mosque prayers (Imams) are always Kuttab Sheikhs, and people seek their advice if they are in doubt whether a particular action or deed is in conformity with religious injunctions. Some of them also recite the Koran during the nightly celebration in Ramadan and at

1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

INDIGENOUS LEARNING AND TEACHING

'mulids', weddings and funerals. They are never addressed without the prefix of 'Sheikh'.

In evaluating the educational aims of the Kuttab, one must remember the purpose of such an institution in a community like Silwa, and its aims in Egyptian society in general during the eighteenth century for instance. The present Kuttab in Silwa fulfills the task demanded of it by the people in maintaining the standards of Islamic learning in which the memorizing of the Koran comes first and foremost. Indeed, the religious and moral ideals of Islam have determined the scope of Islamic education. For the Greeks, education was part of politics, for the Moslems it is part of a comprehensive system of theology. For the latter the object of education is the salvation of the soul and not the control of nature and society.[1]

To expect the Kuttabs to prepare children for practical life or to teach them arithmetic, drawing, or rhythmic movements, according to some of the modern critics of these institutions, is to assume modern standards and social demands in a society which by its very organization does not require its schools to provide such activities. This is the task of the parents, and is to be learnt through life itself. It must be emphasized here that children are sent to the Kuttab voluntarily and they themselves are not averse to attending it to learn part of the Koran. Indeed, the alternative is for the children to work hard in the fields. The Kuttab Sheikhs are fully aware of the drawbacks of the educational system in the village at present. They see that the learning of the Koran by the children is interrupted by compulsory schooling, that parents do not leave their children undisturbed in the Kuttabs but frequently withdraw them to help at home or in the fields. They also complain that fewer boys remain in the Kuttab to go through the Koran again, after they finish the first time, and thus they forget it quickly. Nevertheless, in spite of what one may say of the Kuttab, it is evident from the opinions of the villagers that one cannot ignore the strength of the religious motive that renders this educational institution an integral part of the community. Practically every family in the village with more than two sons would like, as an ideal, to dedicate one of them 'to the cause of knowledge' (Ilm). Moreover, one notices that it is usually the younger brothers who attend the Kuttab, as the older brothers are more often needed for father's aid in farm work. Yet it is not unusual to hear of a man taking a vow to send his first son to the Kuttab, for this means an economic sacrifice for the sake of 'baraka', emanating from learning the Koran. Sending the youngest boy to the Kuttab is considered as a way of showing parental affection for the last born, by sparing him the arduous tasks of working in the fields. Blind boys find in the Kuttab a place where they can absorb themselves in learning the Koran, and it is mostly these blind boys who remain in the Kuttab until they finish memorizing the whole of it.

[1] See for example the writings of Al-Ghazali, *Ihya-ulum-iddin* (Boulak, 1872); Az-Zarnuji, *Ta 'lim al Muta'allim Wa Tariqat at-ta 'allum* (translated by C. E. von Grunebaum and Theodora M. Abel, New York, 1947).